

Whether they support or reject government policy on civil defence, local authorities are still waiting for precise details of their new legal obligations. It may be that the facts are too terrible for the Home Office to reveal. Rosemary Burton reports

## Local councils of war

IT COMES as something of a surprise to learn that the 150-odd local authorities which have declared themselves "nuclear free" zones and refused to co-operate in civil defence plans can quote a government white paper on Defence in support of their action. But it was the government of 1957 which held that "There are no means of protecting the population against the consequences of nuclear attack." Since then the official view has changed.

By the early Seventies, strategists were beginning to think in terms of *fighting* a nuclear war, rather than relying on Mutually Assured Destruction; we were being told (in Municipal Yearbook 1974) that "the Government and its predecessors totally rejected the allegation that the effects of nuclear and lesser forms of attack would be so catastrophic and so disruptive that home defence preparations would be of little or no use and therefore unjustified;" and David Lane, MP with special responsibility for home defence was saying that "To make no preparation at central and local government level against the possibility of war would be an abdication of responsibility." (Presumably the finding of the 1983 BMA Report On Nuclear War, that "any attempt to lay plans for medical services, for food supplies, for all possible nuclear emergencies, becomes a myth" counts as an allegation.)

It was on April Fools Day 1974 that regulations came into force requiring local authorities, under the 1948 Civil Defence Act, to make plans with a view to the possibility of an all out nuclear exchange. Emergency planning teams were to be appointed, there were to be training schemes for personnel, and any authority building new premises was encour-

aged to incorporate "wartime requirements" in the new buildings.

So many local authorities subsequently turned "nuclear free," placing their war plans in public libraries and publishing statistics to highlight the futility of civil defence that, at the end of 1982, the Government was forced to cancel a major civil defence exercise, code-named Hard Rock, because of lack of cooperation. Or, as the Home Office booklet, Civil Defence — The Basic Facts, puts it, "The exercise was postponed indefinitely because of the lack of progress in planning by many local authorities."

Others, however, get a clumsy pat on the back from the headmaster: "They have made notable progress towards creating the capacity within communities to react spontaneously to emergencies rather than to await institutional support. They are mustering and training bodies of volunteers for civil defence tasks within these communities."

What was to be done about the unruly elements, authorities like Leeds, Camden, Islington, Southwark, and Greater Manchester, whose booklet on Emergency Planning and Nuclear War proclaims that "as long as Britain remains a major nuclear target, talk of meaningful 'civil defence' in a nuclear war is a cruel confidence trick"?

The Government response was to make refusal to participate in civil defence planning illegal. Under regulations enacted in December, 1983, local authorities became obliged, not merely to make plans, but to maintain wartime headquarters, to see that staff take part in planning, to organise and train volunteers, to survey any premises that might serve as suitable fall-out shelters, and to follow

specific instructions from Ministers. There is now a direct duty to participate in civil defence exercises and any local authority failing to do so may find that a commissioner is sent in (as happened in St Pancras and Coventry in the 1950s) to take over, with councillors likely to foot the bill.

When the new regulations were first mooted there was an outcry. Union after union, including NALGO, NUPE, and the Fire Brigades Union, declared their opposition to the plans and their support for any members refusing to take part on grounds of conscience. Legal advice to the GLC held that nothing could or should be done until the Home Office provided precise details of what they were supposed to be planning for. And, since December, 1983, all local authorities, those like Westminster, which supports the notion of civil defence and is willing to cooperate, just as much as those like Islington, which is nuclear free and even has its own CND group among council workers, have been waiting for details. A Home Office circular has been promised many times but still fails to appear. There has not even been any sign of the long-expected questionnaire demanding information about individual progress to date.

The peace movement says that the Home Office finds itself in a dilemma. To get cooperation and efficient planning it must issue detailed instructions, but, the theory runs, to issue accurate accounts of the likely impact of nuclear assault would only be to reveal the utter futility of civil defence planning. (As for existing statistics, according to a report produced by the Devon branch of NALGO, "the weight of evidence suggests that the Home Office data should be treated with extreme caution and cannot

be relied upon as a basis for realistic discussion of nuclear war and civil defence." The same report points out that opposition to civil defence can be found among members of all political parties.)

The Catch 22 situation becomes more involved. If the government sees effective civil defence as an essential part of a "counterforce" defence strategy — the readiness to fight a war at any level will only appear credible to an enemy if there are measures to protect the civilian population. But large expenditure on shelters would also undermine the credibility of the defence policy and could be seen as evidence of aggressive warlike intentions.

A number of councils, Camden and Southwark among them, have stated their objections to the new regulations and the GLC is currently carrying out a study which, it is widely believed, will demonstrate the futility of civil defence measures against a nuclear attack on London. Given the union reactions to the new proposals, it looks inevitable that, if and when the government attempts to mount another civil defence exercise, there will be conflict.

Further complications stem from the vagueness of references to civil defence in the Streamlining The Cities white paper which intends to do away with the GLC and other metropolitan authorities.

The only certainty in this issue seems to be the scale of death and destruction and the sheer impossibility of coping with the aftermath of a nuclear conflict. When the next civil defence exercise is mounted, it might be appropriate to return to the sporting terminology of earlier military exercises (Inside Right, Scrum Half, Square Leg, etc.) and call it Silly Point.